Ronald Reagan visit

LOVE AND LIVE
Luke 10:25-37
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Columbus file

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Deep within us is the desire to live life to the fullest, regardless of who we are: regardless of our age, sex, occupation or station, each of us, instinctively, desires and sometimes demands from life authenticity, significance, meaning.

That desire is expressed in a variety of ways. It is the conditon, at least, behind the remarkable rise of cult religion. The tight discipline and single-minded devotion to the rule or the organization or the guru, answers, for many people apparently, the nagging suspicion that life is flying by without ever having been devoted to anything important.

The desire for fullness is expressed sometimes in the creativity of the poet, composer, the "lust for life" of the painter, stretching every aesthetic capacity to make the common more vivid. It is expressed in what the critics of the culture call a new consumerism, a quasi-religion that promises salvation as a result of buying, using, discarding and buying some more. Jules Fieffer, with devastating accuracy, captured it in a recently published cartoon novel entitled, Tantrum. Tantrum is about a forty-two year old man who becomes two years old again - and who laments: "There must be more to life than having everything."

And sometimes this deep and almost irrepressible instinct for significance is expressed in the relentless suspicion that I'm missing something: that other people know something I don't know, and are experiencing a level of joy, satisfaction, happiness, ecstacy which only exists in my fantasies.

From the gloomy testimony of Shakespeare that "Life's...a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing..." to the jarring cynicism of modern existential philosophy, the best minds of our civilization have asked if human life has any significance and, if so, how the individual can find it and enjoy it.

It has never been asked more basically, more simply, than by a lawyer, twenty centuries ago, who caught up with Jesus of Nazareth one time and said, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" We are inclined to use the term "eternal life" to describe a state which begins after death. Jesus and the Jews of the first century, however, used it to describe a new quality of life in the present. "Eternal life" meant a new dimension of living now; a life over which death no longer has any power but, essentially, a new, and profoundly different way to live in the world today. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Translate that - "What shall I do to live fully, joyfully, significantly?"

Jesus' answer is among the more precious stories He ever told. It is also a disturbing story. Mark Twain once said that it wasn't what he couldn't understand about the Bible that disturbed him. What bothered him, he said, was what he understood perfectly well. I feel that way about the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It bothers me, precisely because its meaning is unmistakably clear.

Luke says the man who asked the question wanted to test Jesus. That could mean that he wanted to see how well Jesus had done his homework and how thoroughly He knew the law. It could mean that he hoped to catch Jesus in an embarassing deviation from orthodoxy. I've always wanted to give the man the benefit of the doubt and assume, at least in part, he was asking the same question each one of us asks.

In point of fact, the man knew the answer. He was a lawyer and knew the law. He was probably wearing a portion of it in the phylactery which dangled from his wrist. Generations earlier the Rabbis had condensed the Deuteronomic and Levitical code into a summary of the life-giving covenant with God. "What does the law say?" Jesus asked. The lawyer responded in the only way he could..."You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind - and your neighbor as yourself." "Do that and you will live - fully, significantly, authentically," Jesus said.

We should be grateful that he was a good lawyer and did not let well enough alone at this point. I suspect he was somewhat embarassed by his predicament. He had asked a question which he was forced to answer himself. In a sense, he had been caught playing a game. And so he asked another question: an excellent question, "Who is my neighbor?" At its best, Judaism, in the prophetic tradition of Amos, Hosea, Jonah, defined neighbor as "fellow human being". At its narrowest Judaism defined neighbor as "fellow Jew". Religion has a depressing tendency to become arrogant and to consign to hell anyone who does not agree with its portion of truth. The first century was one of the narrow times. Under foreign occupation, the religion of the Temple had become rigid, chauvanistic, exclusive.

"Who is my neighbor?" the lawyer asked. But please remember that the question before the house is still - "How shall I inherit eternal life?"

There are few short stories in literature that can compare with what comes next. "A certain man", not identified by race, religion, nationality, is on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho - seventeen miles down a rocky 3,000 foot descent. And, as happened too frequently, the man was mugged: beaten, robbed, left to die by the roadside.

A priest, walking by saw the man and made a wide circle around him. A Levite, religious bureaucrat, did the same thing. Finally, a Samaritan happened along, saw the victim, bound up his wounds, piled him on the donkey, took him to the closest inn and paid for his period of convalescence. Extraordinary! Jews hated Samaritans. Samaritans hated Jews. Jews thought Samaritans lost their racial purity and therefore the claim to God's promise centuries before by cozying up to the Assyrians. Samaritans thought Jews had usurped the covenant and turned it into a private club. Because they were really cousins the feeling between Jews and Samaritans had all the bitterness about it of a family feud.

The priest and Levite who walked by the man lying in the ditch had broken no law. As a matter of fact there were legalities by which to rationalize what they did. The law required that a person who had contact with a corpse refrain from participating in religious rituals for a week, and if you're a priest, or Levite, and your whole life is wrapped up in religious ritual...you shouldn't let that happen. Besides, the oldest highway trick in the book is to stake out a decoy and when some poor, unsuspecting soul stops to help, knock him over before he knows what's happening. And besides they were probably busy people on their way to important appointments, and besides there was a highway patrol and Red Cross for this sort of thing. There aren't many days in my life when I don't make a decision similar to theirs.

Jesus still has not answered the lawyer's question. In fact, at the conclusion of the story, He asks one of His own: "Who was a neighbor to the man in need?" And again, even though he had not asked how to be a neighbor, the lawyer is forced to answer, "The one who showed mercy." Jesus responded, "Go and do likewise", and I'm convinced that now we have the answer - His answer - to the original question, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

The lawyer was led, by a very good teacher, to draw his own conclusions. He was taught that his salvation was tied up with his neighbor, and that his neighbor was anyone who needed him, not necessarily the person with whom he shared a common neighborhood, race, nation, style of life or political persuasion. Eternal life has something to do with recognizing my neighbors as the people who need me.

Henri Nouwen tells about a conversation he had with an older, distinguished professor at Notre Dame. Strolling over the campus on a beautiful afternoon, the older gentleman said, "You know...my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." (Reaching Out, p. 36). Nouwen, Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, suggests that unexpected intrustions in life are opportunities for growth and creativity, that God calls us to full humanity precisely through the interruptions we are inclined to ignore.

Jesus' story teaches that the man in the ditch is more important than the business meeting in Jericho. It suggests that you and I may be missing our salvation for similar reasons.

The story holds up compassion as the key. The Samaritan saw a suffering man and felt something. The tilt of modern city life, seems to be in the opposite direction. It is not news that we are a lonely crowd, that urban life is impersonal, that the electronic data processing by which the future will do business is not equipped to deal with names and faces and feelings. Compassion - fellow feeling with fellow human beings - survives in small communities where neighbors see one another daily. It is a fragile phenomenon in cities. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan wrote: "Who is my neighbor? He may be the person next door, the person who occupies an apartment in the same block as mine...Jesus says I am to love that person. The truth is that very often we don;t even know him! That is why a city can be the loneliest place on earth..." (Great Words of Christian Faith, p.47).

The very size of city problems dictates large, sophisticated solutions. Hunger, illiteracy, drug abuse, unemployment are complex problems which command the best thinking and the most efficient organizations we can produce. But someone has to remember, and remind the city, that hunger is measured not only by the average nutritional level but a little child who hasn't eaten for two days; and unemployment is not only the absence of jobs for a percentage of the populace but also the particular forty year old man who has simply given up and finds his only comfort in the fantasy world of daytime TV, and that poverty is not only accumulated data in government computers but the particular ADC mother whose apartment rent and utility bills exceed her monthly welfare check, and illiteracy is not just the inability to read Shakespeare, but the directions on food packages and instructions on job applications.

Someone has to hold on for dear life to the capacity for compassion. Someone must risk the cynicism of those for whom "do-gooder" is a criticism. Jesus suggested that it is our job and that our salvation depends on it.

Eternal life, Jesus taught the lawyer, happens when a person can see human need, and can feel its pain, and then gets absorbed, lost in the task of meeting it. The Christian secret is that if you want to live you have to love. It's a secret because somewhere along the line most of us become very suspicious of rewards in religion. Presbyterian theologians have taught us that salvation is a gift; that we can't earn it; that the minute we try to acquire it we cause more trouble for ourselves...all of which

I believe. But sometimes, I also believe,we miss the Christian secret in the process; namely, that to love is really to live; that in fact you do find life by losing it a little bit.

The culture in which we live does not hesitate to offer its prescriptions for the good life. "The New Narcissism" was last year's definition: self-centeredness run wild, selfishness with psychological respectability added to it; self-indulgence now called self-realization. This year's definition is from the Futurist scholars who are talking about the "commoditization" of all of life. Listen to one of them predict what is around the corner - after we have consumed all the goods and materials we can handle and taken all the vacations we can stand..."What is already on the horizon is the consumption of spiritual experience, personal growth cults, drug induced ecstacy... training in mystical meditation to make you feel better...Once aware - religious entrepreneurs will take to pandering their wares...It will be subtle, and it will be cloaked in the noble language of personal growth, but nevertheless the pressure will be on to treat religious experience as a commodity for consumption."(The Futurist, October 1980, p.22, Ted Peters - "The Future of Religion in a Post-Industrial Society").

There are and will be tempting alternatives, pretending to answer the question of authentic, meaningful life. Jesus suggested that the answer has to do with love. It is not difficult, frankly, to document His assertion psychologically. Victor Frankl, for instance..."The more one forgets oneself - the more human he is...Once one has served a cause or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself." (The Unconscious God, p.79, 84,85). Or, W.C.Menninger, brilliant psychiatrist and committed Christian, who when asked how to be happy always said simply, "Find a mission in life and take it seriously." (Ernest Campbell, Locked in a Room with Open Doors, p.173).

The Christian secret is that real life, a life with the quality of eternity about it; full, satisfying, significant, joyful human life - happens when it is given away in compassionate love for the sake of someone or something else. The world needs Christian people who know that secret: people willing to be out of step at times, people willing to love and care. The nation needs a church that knows that secret: an institution willing to risk even its own popularity to advocate the cause of any and all those who end up lying beside the road. But the real need - the fundamental need is ours, ours personally, yours and mine.

You and I ask the question, "How shall I inherit eternal Life?" The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ responded to that question. In fact, He is the answer himself. "Follow me," He said, "take up a cross, lose your life, love, give, sacrifice." And the miracle is that when we do that, when we become His people, something is added to us, something we almost forgot about because we were so busy loving, something called salvation.

St.Francis of Assisi wrote a beloved prayer one time - the concluding line of which gathered up the truth of his life, and the Christian secret...

"Help me to learn that in giving I may receive;
in forgetting myself I may find life eternal."

That is the promise. In the neighbor in need, we encounter Jesus Christ. In love - in caring, healing, compassionate love, we are given the gift of life. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

God eternal, forgive us the times we have walked by those who need us. Teach us that what we really have missed is our own salvation. Forgive us the times we have been too busy to see. Teach us that what we have missed is life. God of love, give us strength to love and to live in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.